

## Serbia now has a pro-European parliament, but the country's path to EU accession looks as uncertain as ever

*The pro-European Serbian Progressive Party secured a clear victory in Serbia's elections on 16 March. **Denisa Kostovicova** writes that while Serbia now has a pro-European parliament, the country's path to EU accession is more complex than it appears. The new government will have a notably pragmatic approach to Europe, but the issue of Kosovo is still likely to present a challenge in negotiations.*



The extent of the electoral victory in Serbia's early parliamentary vote on 16 March may have surprised even the election's mastermind himself. Serbian Progressive Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia's deputy prime minister, read the moment unmistakably.

The EU had kicked off the long-awaited negotiations with Serbia in January this year, after granting it candidate status. The break-through in the EU-led Serbia-Kosovo talks on normalisation of relations had gone down without a political ripple. All that remained was to tap into the disaffection of the transition losers, while holding a moral high ground with promises to root out corruption. Accordingly, the election campaign was conducted under the banner of a root-and-branch reform, albeit without offering policy detail. Kosovo and the EU were barely mentioned.



According to eminent Serbian political analyst Vladimir Goati, the Serbian Progressive Party 'hoovered' the votes of the disaffected regardless of party affiliation. This was not difficult given that the unemployment rate in the country exceeds 20 per cent. The result was an absolute majority: 158 seats for the Serbian Progressives in the 250-seat parliament.



The Serbian Parliament, Skupština, Credit: FIF (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Vucic's remaining dilemma is whether to capitalise on that victory by forming a government of Progressives, or show restraint by recruiting a partner with a minority vote. The latter option would address the general unease

within the country toward absolute power at the hands of one man. Such fears are not misplaced in a young democracy like Serbia, with palpable memories of rule by a strongman Slobodan Milosevic.

Civic-oriented, middle-class Serbia was decimated, along with the political elite that ousted Milosevic's regime in October 2000. An alternative civic political vision has to be built from scratch. Vucic, once a die-hard nationalist and anti-Europeanist, has emerged as a torchbearer on Serbia's journey to Europe and rapprochement with Kosovo.

### Pragmatic Europeanisation

The granting of EU candidate status to Serbia was a true game changer in the EU-Serbia relationship. An insider summarised succinctly this relationship by saying that 'They pretended that they were reforming, and we pretended that we wanted them'.

Now the pretences are off. The EU's commitment to Serbia's future EU membership has become contractual. The opposition to the European project in Serbia is squashed. For the first time, there are no opponents of Serbia's accession to the EU in the Serbian parliament. The road to the EU should, at least in theory, be a matter of painstaking alignment with *the acquis communautaire*, the EU's body of law, as a criterion for the eventual membership.

However, there is more to Serbia's journey than meets the eye. Vucic's ability to deliver an agreement on Kosovo in the EU-sponsored talks has earned him credibility in Brussels. But, his approach to Europeanisation may yet appear as a problem.

The current leader of the European project is a pragmatist. Like the Serbian president, Tomislav Nikolic, who is from the same party, Vucic discovered European integration as a winning ticket after the Progressives lost votes in successive elections, largely for not jumping on the European bandwagon. Nikolic's U-turn, and his endorsement of Europeanisation, secured him the Serbian presidency. The ascendance of the Serbian Progressive Party to its present domination of the Serbian political scene has followed the same logic.

For a pragmatist, the goal of Europe is primarily about living standards. When Vucic talks about Serbia's European prospects, he talks about 'a better future'. This means economic development. It is not about a 'return home' to a community of values, where one belongs righteously and unmistakably. This idea mobilised the candidate states in Eastern and Central Europe and allowed them to extend their political horizons while bearing the high costs of reforms in the accession process. Instead, from the Serbian perspective the destination of Europe has more complex connotations.

### **Ambiguous destination**

This week is the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1999 NATO intervention in Serbia, when the Western alliance intervened to protect ethnic Albanians from force unleashed by the Serbian security forces in Kosovo. Public commemorations of about 2,500 Serbian civilian and military victims of the 78-day air campaign were held throughout the country. Around 10,000 Albanian victims of Serbian repression, as well as of NATO's 'collateral damage', were not mentioned. Against this backdrop, the Serbian leadership articulated a more ambiguous relationship with Europe, which they see as a supporter of the illegitimate and unlawful carving out of the Albanian state in the Serbian heartland of Kosovo.

This is why the Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic said that the new government will be 'neither pro-Russian, nor pro-European, but pro-Serbian.' And, this is why, the recognition of Kosovo, in the words of another official, is a 'red line' in the negotiations with the EU. Similarly, when asked about Russia's annexation of Crimea, Vucic was unequivocal in saying that Serbia will not have a hostile attitude towards Russia, adding that 'we cannot be lectured about this (international norms) by those who trod lightly on Serbia's territorial integrity'.

The start of the negotiations between Serbia and the EU depended on the implementation of the Belgrade-Pristina agreement. The moment the ballots in Serbia were counted, the same message arrived from Western capitals and from Brussels. Serbia and Kosovo's prime ministers were summoned for the next round of talks. This reinforces another message from Brussels: progress in Serbia's European integration is linked with progress in normalisation of relations with Kosovo.

Why might this become a problem? Serbia has thus far successfully managed its dual-approach, combining progress in the European integration process with non-recognition of Kosovo. The secret of that success lies in, what I have called in a recently-published [article](#), 'discursive denial'. Playing up the idea of non-recognition of Kosovo's independence was used strategically by Serbia's successive leaderships to obfuscate and minimise the extent to which it has already had to cede actual authority to Kosovo. A recent poll by Ipsos Strategic Marketing confirms my findings: the Status of Kosovo tops the list of policy areas that those polled consider 'not discussed sufficiently objectively or truthfully'.

The same poll also confirms ambiguity about Serbia's destination, with 46 per cent of those polled having a

positive attitude towards Russia. This compares with 27 per cent with a positive, and 41 per cent with a negative attitude towards the EU. This does not, however, stop even those who have a negative view of the EU from declaring that they would vote for EU accession if asked in a referendum. Polling indicates that 54 per cent would currently vote in favour.

Integrating normalisation of relations with Pristina into the EU accession process means Serbia will have to recognise Kosovo's sovereignty in ever more policy areas. As Serbia moves forward to the EU, and as the costs of adaptation begin to rise through implementation of long-delayed economic reforms, the question is whether just pragmatism, without conviction, debate or liberal vision, will be enough to see Serbia through the process.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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